

Popollution—Are We All Guilty? The Higher and Higher Wisdom

JOSHUA LEDERBERG, PH.D., M.D. (hon.),
Stanford*

"WE CAN NEVER do merely one thing" is a self-evident postulate of the ecological thinking advocated by Garrett Hardin.** The same principle should also be applied to eco-ideological generalizations. These are vulnerable to the same hazard as other mega-projects, like the Aswan dam or cheap pesticides: that the side-effects of a sub-optimally designed system may be self-defeating, exhibiting larger costs than benefits when globally analyzed.

For one thing, a symbolic label, while providing an appropriate demonology, may interfere with the recognition of real and soluble problems. Peaceful solutions to the actual conflicts between nations are not particularly helped by decrying war as an autonomous evil; nor will we protect our environment by blaming "technology" for its exploitation. If we follow this path, we might as well attribute all our inhumanities to human nature—and rationally decide to abolish man as we know him.

When the ecological movement flaunts the slogan "We have met the enemy and he is us," it spreads an insidious cynicism about human value.

*Professor of Genetics, Stanford University School of Medicine.

**Hardin G: Everybody's guilty—The ecological dilemma. Calif Med 113:40-47, Nov 1970

This is compounded by such allegations as "Every American is 20 times worse than any Indian," which applies some index of pollution and resource-consumption and a self-abasing denial of any progressive aspect of Western culture. The logical ideal for the planet, in this view, would be not merely zero-population growth but zero population.

A by-product of such cynicism is a depreciation of the person, an erosion of his self-respect by counting him as a maleficent statistic, that surely adds to the fanaticism and suicidal-aggressive outbursts that scar the campus environment today.

Furthermore, argumentation for compulsory control of reproduction inspires reasonable fears as to whether a bio-technocracy will police conceptions—but I should reassure Hoppe's colleague, Charles McCabe, that one biologist does not constitute the whole Establishment.

Dr. Hardin does well to dramatize the crushing problems we bring upon ourselves by unchecked growth of population; and I press as strongly as he does for proposals to facilitate voluntary abortion and self-sterilization, and a wider range of careers for women than unlimited motherhood.

Hardin quoted Davis' remark that in most countries, "women want more children than the nation needs to achieve zero population growth." He takes this *want* as a given; instead we should go on to "the painful social reforms that would be necessary to reduce the desire for children." We must do this in a way that does not impair our respect for the value of every individual once he enters the human community.

Population is not a single autonomous problem. For example, countries like Australia and New Zealand feel compelled to *increase* their numbers as an element of national security; if immigration were facilitated—for example, by solving predictable problems of racial conflicts—this might be forfended.

Within the United States, the problem has many disparate components. One of these is the isolation of the nuclear family and the reactive striving for an internal richness of human contact, which could also be achieved by the re-extension of the family. This aim of many experiments in commune living now gets little encouragement from municipal zoning and housing plans.

Another is connected with the economic and political transitions of black and other minority

cultures, which parallel the underdeveloped nations abroad. But we generally do not know enough of the ultimate cultural and psychological foundations of the desire for children to verify effective ways of renovating reproductive behaviors.

Some of the necessary social reforms are still as obvious as they are painful. In rich and poor countries alike, they must provide for the security and comfort of older people separately from a large brood of dutiful offspring. We could outlaw that a man be supported by his sons; better that we make it unnecessary.

An orderly society depends on the acquiescence of its citizens in certain limitations of their freedom, as a fair bargain for the advantages of living in the community. Our unique genetic endowment is a necessary basis for whatever we describe as human. But this could only be realized through the evolution of a culture whose building was as costly in blood and tears as is Darwinian natural selection. The surest way to disrupt a society and its culture, unless it be contained in a totalitarian straitjacket, is to multiply the overt and coercive demands of the social contract. In the long run, as Hardin has argued elsewhere, every policy of the state might be regarded as "coercive"; but a free society requires that an elaborate "due process" be associated with the most direct restraints on personal behavior. There is a difference between a prison and a pamphlet as an approach to shaping behavior. And as the failure of our experiments on the "prohibition" of alcohol and of other drugs clearly shows, the police power cannot work without a general consensus about the wickedness of prohibited acts. For this reason alone, allusions to compulsory limitations on births are worse than futile.

They are also mischievous wherever the under-classes account for an increasing part of excessive population growth. This differential might be relieved by providing more nearly equal opportunities for self- and family-advancement. We have still to complete the experiment of the necessary and costly investments in employment, education and esteem. Without such investments the only moral foundation for asking the poor to cooperate voluntarily in population control is that it may often serve their private interests as well.

Social progress is also mocked by allegations that high levels of production and consumption inevitably destroy our environmental amenities,

out of proportion (as Dr. Hardin's figures show) to the statistics of population increase. Some conversion of natural into artificial environments must accompany the human occupation of the planet. We have, however, used only the crudest (and superficially cheapest) aspects of technology in building our roads and cities to their present standing. We can now see the stirrings of a more insightful economic vision that takes account of the erosion of human resources and of environmental capital in evaluating our true productivity. Its success is a necessary step toward creating that style of living which harmonizes individual and community goals. If we fail, the oppressed can take their revenge on the affluent by overbreeding; and if our response is then statist control of reproduction, we can well say we had dug the grave of our freedom with our own air hammers.